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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 000755

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DEPT FOR EAP AND EAP/CM
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TAGS: CH HK PGOV PHUM PINR PREL VT
SUBJECT: BISHOP ZEN ELEVATED TO CARDINAL

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Classified By: E/P Chief Simon Schuchat. Reasons: 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: On February 22, Pope Benedict XVI named 15 new cardinals, among them Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, head of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, and an outspoken defender of religious freedom on the mainland as well as a leading figure in the democracy movement in Hong Kong. Zen told reporters that his elevation signaled the Pope's "goodwill and love for the whole of China." As cardinal, Zen will be one of Pope Benedict's most senior advisors on policy towards China. The official reaction from China has been muted so far, with one official stating that China would benefit from a new cardinal. Comment: Some analysts have speculated that because of Beijing's distrust of Zen, his appointment might serve as an obstacle to a resumption of dialogue between Beijing and the Holy See, but others see his appointment in a more positive light. If a deal were eventually brokered to normalize the diplomatic relationship, Zen's reputation as an outspoken defender of religious freedom and advocate for democracy might help marshal support among the more skeptical underground Catholic community. End Summary and Comment.

Vatican Appoints Outspoken Bishop Zen as Cardinal

¶2. (SBU) On February 22, Pope Benedict XVI named 15 new cardinals, his first nominations since taking over the papacy. There were three Asian bishops elevated, including Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, head of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, as well as bishops from Seoul and Manila. Zen, an outspoken defender of religious freedom on the mainland as well as a leading figure in the democracy movement in Hong Kong, will be the second church leader from Hong Kong and the sixth ethnic Chinese in the history of the Catholic Church to be named a cardinal. Zen will be formally appointed as a cardinal during a ceremony at the Vatican on March 24.

¶3. (SBU) Pope Benedict's announcement helped fill a possible void in the leadership of the Chinese Catholic community. Zen, 74, had been approaching the mandatory retirement age of 75 and had sent a letter to the pope requesting retirement last month. With the retirement issue now moot, Zen, who is under the age of the cutoff age of 80, will be the only ethnic Chinese cardinal eligible to vote in a conclave to elect Pope Benedict's successor. (Note: During the 2005 papal conclave that elected Pope Benedict, there were no ethnic Chinese cardinals eligible to vote. There is currently only one living cardinal in the Greater China region, Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, who retired as the head of the Kaohsiung, Taiwan diocese last month. At 82, Cardinal

Shan was ineligible to vote in the last conclave. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Following the pope's announcement, Zen told reporters that he was "very happy" and said that his elevation signaled the pope's "goodwill and love for the whole of China." "He didn't name a lot of cardinals this time. A lot of dioceses that typically get appointments didn't. This shows his priority for China," said Zen. He said that hoped to visit the mainland and begin dialogue with the central government. "I don't just want to go sightseeing, but to have a formal and constructive dialogue."

Initial Reaction from Beijing is Muted

¶5. (C) As cardinal, Zen will be one of Pope Benedict's most senior advisors on policy towards China, explained Papal Nuncio Eugene Nugent. He told poloff on February 23 that the Vatican had initially been concerned about a possible negative reaction from Beijing. As an outspoken critic of central government policies on religion, Zen was branded a "Vatican agent" by the mainland and was banned from the mainland for six years. However, relations between Zen and mainland leaders have thawed, beginning with an April 2004 trip by Zen to visit Shanghai. Moreover, in recent years, Zen has articulated, on numerous occasions, the Vatican's stated policy of seeking an improved relationship with China.

¶6. (SBU) The only reaction from the Chinese Government so far is a statement by Liu Bainian, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, who said that China would benefit from a new cardinal. As Liu's statement was made prior to the Vatican's official announcement, he did not mention Zen by name.

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The Best Candidate

¶7. (C) Father Peter Barry, a researcher at the Holy Spirit Study Center (HSSC) told "Asianews," an online Catholic newsletter, "Zen is the best candidate because he knows China, he is known among Chinese Catholics...Zen can represent the voice of the Chinese Church in the universal Church and with the Holy Father." Nugent confided to poloff that one of several reasons why the Pope selected Zen was for his expertise on the mainland Catholic Church -- both the official and underground communities. As for his character, Professor Gianni Criveller of the HSSC told poloff that Zen's direct and outspoken approach was simply a part of his personality, and would not change as a consequence of his elevation.

Shifts towards Sino-Vatican Normalization?

¶8. (C) Separately, during a meeting with John Kamm, Dui Hua Executive Director on February 22, Kamm told us that he had heard from one of his sources that Shanghai Bishop Aloysius Jin had told the source that the Minister of Public Security was now in favor of normalizing Sino-Vatican relations. The PSB, according to Bishop Jin, has enough work dealing with "cults" and would prefer to let the Catholic Church manage its own underground adherents. According to Kamm's source, the key holdout to an improvement of relations remains Ye Xiaowen, the Director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs.

Biographic Information

¶9. (SBU) Zen was born in Shanghai in 1932 and moved to Hong

Kong in 1948. He joined the priesthood in 1961 and beginning in 1971, taught at Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary College. From 1989-1996, Zen became the first theologian from the Hong Kong diocese to lecture in mainland seminaries. In 1996, Zen was appointed as Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong. In 2002, he was named as the Bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese after the death of Cardinal John Baptist Wu.

¶10. (C) In addition to his criticisms of the central government's religious policies, Zen has also been an outspoken critic of Hong Kong government policies on national security legislation, universal suffrage, and educational reform. More recently, Zen was a signatory to a full-page advertisement in several newspapers calling on Chief Executive (CE) Donald Tsang to exercise "courageous leadership" by asking mainland leaders to set up a timetable for universal suffrage in Hong Kong. According to Monsignor Nugent, when Bishop Zen encountered CE Tsang at a recent function, the Bishop sensed that Tsang had taken the criticism personally and still felt hurt. During protests at last December's World Trade Organization Ministerial meeting in Hong Kong, Zen criticized the Hong Kong police for their handling of anti-globalization protestors, sparking anger among the police, who later sent letters of protest to the Vatican. Despite speculation that the Pope might ask Zen to serve in the Vatican, our contacts say that Zen is most likely to remain in Hong Kong as the head of the Catholic Diocese for the next several years.

Sakaue